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1 The publication of a new book by John Beattie is inevitably a major event in criminal justice history. As a pioneering historian of eighteenth-century crime, law and punishment, his previous works instantly became foundational studies in the field. In this latest offering, Beattie turns his formidable historical acumen to research on the most famous body of police officers prior to the 'new' police – the Bow Street runners. The result is an extremely thorough and insightful account of crime and policing, yet one which nonetheless signals the persistent complexities which surround the interpretation of nineteenth-century police reforms.

2 The opening chapters chart the organisation and activities of the runners in meticulous detail. The management of information was key to the administration of policing at Bow Street : from the outset, John Fielding retained descriptions of suspicious characters and stolen property, including the 'watch book', which recorded the makers' names and numbers of timepieces, which were communicated to pawnbrokers to prevent the circulation of stolen goods. Such bureaucratic procedures were essential to the detective work of Fielding's men, which also involved extensive use of informants through the flash houses of Covent Garden, a practice about which the runners themselves were always remarkably frank and open. Taking records of stolen property was also vital to another of their key duties – giving evidence in court. Here the watch

book and other such documents were particularly helpful, allowing the runners to bring a greater rigour to the eighteenth-century prosecutorial process. Beattie's suggestion that this in turn contributed to the rise of defence counsel from the 1780s is but one of several perceptive remarks regarding the impact of innovative policing methods on the criminal prosecution.

3 The casual reader, who misses Beattie's explanation that the records of Bow Street have not survived, would suppose that the author works from a neat and tidy archive. The reality, however, is that this book is the result of a painstaking exercise of historical reconstruction, piecing together scraps from the Home Office files, personal correspondence, newspapers and the Old Bailey sessions papers. For all the diligence of the runners themselves, it is therefore the author's own detective skill which stands out from this volume.

4 While scholars will find this survey a very welcome addition to the growing literature on eighteenth-century policing, it is probably the later chapters – concerning metropolitan police reform from the late eighteenth century to the 1830s – which will attract the greatest interest. While the runners were never simply a detective force, a core argument running through the book posits a gradual shift from the detective to the preventative model of policing after 1770. Beattie opens this narrative with a revealing account of government responses to the post-war crime wave in the 1780s. Confronting numerous robberies and the cessation of transportation, the authorities extended preventative policing (the Bow Street 'Patrole' was established in 1782) and made radical reforms to the office of magistrate and to police powers (under the 1792 Middlesex Justices Act). According to Beattie, these measures were the culmination of a generation of innovation at Bow Street ; by any measure, they demonstrate that the central state had assumed a pro-active role in the response to crime by the late eighteenth century.

5 The decisive transition to the preventative police strategy, however, came only in the years of peace after 1815. Beattie claims that the rapid rise of petty property crime replaced street robbery as the object of greatest concern, sidelining the Bow Street runners and necessitating further police reform. Although Lord Sidmouth embraced the logic of preventative policing during his term as Home Secretary, the arrival of Robert Peel brought a new urgency and system to reform. Alarmed by rising crime rates, as well as scanty police coverage on the outskirts of the metropolis, Peel eventually brought forward the Metropolitan Police Act, which passed without opposition from constitutional radicals and local authorities. Thus the swing from detection to prevention was not only complete, but even overdone ; the detective innocence of the new force produced a series of scandals surrounding the response to murder cases in the 1830s, leading ultimately to the creation of the detective department in 1842.

6 Although this account is often persuasive, the shift from detective to preventative policing is not as broadly scoped as it might have been. In Beattie's eyes, changing patterns of crime more or less straightforwardly drive the process of police reform. The tough, armed runners of Bow Street arose to counter the threat of violent property crime, yet as violence later subsided the preventative model was adopted to combat the new plague of petty thefts. At stake here is not whether patterns of prosecution reflected actual levels of offending – although Beattie is generally inclined to believe they did – but whether governmental responses to crime were not mediated by other

considerations. In particular, Beattie neglects to consider how the ‘powerful belief in preventative measures’ (p. 260) took hold in the context of shifts in governing mentalities in the early nineteenth century, particularly the salience of a broadly utilitarian, mechanical conception of economic and social relations, which had much purchase in circles frequented by Peel. Removed from such contexts, historians risk presenting police reform as an unproblematic response to a self-evident problem (whether crime or popular unrest), without explaining why contemporaries identified these problems and their solutions, and how both related to particular historical conceptions of the social order and the role of government in maintaining it.

7 Such a critique, however, is manifestly uncharitable. This book offers a sophisticated and lively account of eighteenth-century policing and the path to reform. The narrative of transition from detective to preventative models of policing is highly suggestive, and always presented with gracious, often unwarranted modesty. Only because the book deserves and will doubtless command a wide and appreciative readership is one compelled to register points of dissent. They should be taken, however, not as failings of the present work, but as a challenge to others to integrate multiple perspectives into a panoramic history of police reform. In the meantime, we have Beattie to thank for another impressive book, which achieves far more than ensuring that the Bow Street runners will be ‘a little better understood.’ (p. 264).

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